Working as an Effective Team

On the first day of class, I inform my students that many of the presentations they will do throughout the course will involve teamwork. Inevitably, some students look immediately uncomfortable or outright annoyed by the announcement. If only I could show them *then* what I know will happen *later*.

It has often been the case that when a team presentation ends and I disband the teams, many students mourn the loss of the teammates. If I give students the option to pick their own teams later in the semester, they often go back to the people in their original groupings. The simple truth is that *most teams find more success together than they would have found as individuals*.

This is why so much of what you will encounter in the professional world will involve teamwork. Creative teams brainstorm together, sales teams sell together, editing teams collaborate on publications together, and even accountants handle large clients together. Therefore, being able to "play well with others" is an important skill for the job market. Learning to prepare and present presentations in team units will help you hone this skill.

Nonetheless, bringing together people with varying viewpoints and differing communication styles can invariably lead to conflict. What follows in this article are tips to help you reap the benefits of teamwork while avoiding some of the more common pitfalls, from your first day together through your presentation planning.

Forming a Team: Setting the Stage for Success

It's clear in a team presentation when a group has worked well together and when it has not. Successful teams are more dynamic and comfortable, have vetted their ideas more thoroughly, and give clearer explanations and more convincing pitches. When groups are experiencing friction or are less cohesive as a team, that shows too. The presentation feels piecemealed, the overall organization is less clear, ideas are not as strong, and question-and-answer sessions tend to be messy.

Being able to set the stage for positive group communication is therefore extremely important. Groups can fall into negative communication patterns quickly, which can leave some members feeling isolated and disengaged from Day 1. Therefore, your first team meeting is an important time to establish a group dynamic that will be productive and inclusive. The following are some tips to help your team get off to a healthy start:

- **Physically arrange yourselves so everyone is part of the "circle of trust."** Oftentimes when teams first form, laziness will dictate that students sit in unformed globs of desks that keep some in the center of the conversation, while others remain on the periphery. Establish an inclusive seating arrangement right away—make sure everyone is sitting in a circle so that each group member can see and hear one another clearly.
- **Get to know each other as people and workers before you discuss business.** It's tempting to jump right into discussions on the project at hand and just get down to work, but teammates affinity (or dislike) of one another greatly affects individuals' commitment to the team. Learning about one another *before* you start working on the presentation is crucial to establishing the group dynamic that will allow you to be most productive later. Here are some items you should learn about one another and how they can help you make early decisions about your team:

- **What you have in common.** First impressions might tell you that you are very different from some of your teammates, but chances are that you all have something in common, and that something can be what helps you create an initial rapport and comfort with one another. I've seen student teams bond over their collective love of breakfast foods, TV shows, countries they want to visit, pets, siblings, hometowns, favorite memes, and even feelings about specific celebrities.
    - **Identifying commonalities helps you create your team name and identity.** This name should not be related to the topic of your presentation, but rather it should be about you all as a collective unit. Often, the commonalities you find with one another help to form the team name. The team that all loved breakfast foods were the Breakfast Bees. A team full of outgoing people were the Social Butterflies. A team that all found mutual frustration over the immense amount of goose droppings around campus were the Goosebusters. Other teams have come up with team logos, mottos, or coordinating outfit colors to help them gel into a more cohesive unit. A group name and identity allow your team to become something more than just a collection of individuals.
- **What each of your strengths and weaknesses are in relation to this class.** You don't need to discuss personal failures and triumphs; instead, think of these as your contributions to and requests of your team. If Jaida says her strength is PowerPoint, she is essentially offering her PowerPoint skills to her team. If she says her weakness is procrastination, she is asking her teammates to give her frequent time reminders to keep her on schedule.
    - **Identifying individual strengths and weaknesses helps you create a team structure.** Your team structure should not be focused on the pieces of content you each will cover in the presentation, especially at this early stage of group formation. Instead, the team structure should be more about how each of your strengths can contribute to the team's productivity. Who will be the team timekeeper that ensures everyone is on track? Who will be the team tech person who can help with PowerPoint or sharing files? Who will be the friendly critic who will tell everyone when something needs to change or when an idea is bad? Everyone has a role to play. Decide how you each fit into the fabric of your team so everyone can use their strengths to benefit the team as a unit.
- **Your work preferences.** Share what kind of a worker you are—whether you like to work ahead or procrastinate, whether you are super organized or thrive in "controlled chaos," whether you are an early bird or a night owl, etc. Identifying where your teammates differ can help everyone to set realistic expectations of one another. If Olive the early bird prefers to get her work done in the morning before her classes, Randall the night owl shouldn't expect Olive to respond to his texts at midnight the night before.
    - **Identifying work preferences helps you establish group ground rules.** As a team, lay out a list of expectations for each other about how you will work together. Be sure you all participate in the discussion and that you all agree on the rules you make, and what will result is a list of realistic standards for your group. These can include expectations about when individual portions of work should be due to the group, how the quality of individual work will be assessed

by the group, how group decisions should be made, how and when groups should communicate with each other, etc. Keep the list visible at all group meetings so that everyone can be reminded of the commitments they agreed upon as a team.

- **Your communication styles.** Differing communication styles can be a major source of discord in a team, and while some miscommunication is inevitable, a great deal can be avoided through ***metacommunication*** (communicating about how we communicate) beforehand. If Vincent comes from a family that enjoys loud and raucous debating, he is likely to bring that communication style to his group. Vincent's style, though, may seem rude and overly aggressive to Sam, whose family is much more reserved and even keeled. Group tensions could be avoided on Day 1 by both Vincent and Sam being honest about their own communication styles and helping their teammates navigate them. Vincent could say, "Hey, I'm a debater and I tend to get a little loud. If I'm being too much, please just tell me to stop. I promise, I'm not trying to cut anyone down or make anyone uncomfortable" and Sam could say, "I don't do well with yelling and interrupting. It tends to make me shut down, so if you notice me getting me quiet, you may need to pause and check in with me." Consider your own communication style and habits, and share those with your teammates. What makes you want to participate or not want to participate? What should your teammates do or say if you are upset or loud or quiet or isolated?
    - **Identifying communication styles helps you establish group communication protocols.** Consider the meeting format that would work best for everyone's communication styles. If you have some more reserved groupmates who may be forthcoming with ideas in group discussions, consider implementing a round-robin format when brainstorming, in which each person takes a turn to share their opinion before the group discusses the merits of any of them. If you have someone who tends to dominate decision-making, try making all group decisions through voting. If you have one or more people who tend to interrupt others, implement a "talking stick," in which only the person holding the stick (or pen or whatever else you designate) can speak. Ensuring that everyone feels heard and comfortable sharing their opinion will help everyone feel like a valued member of the team.

Working Together

After your teammates have become acquainted with one another and your team norms and structure have been formed, it's time to get down to business. If you've done the previous stages well, your team should benefit from healthy collaboration, but keep in mind that group patterns are dynamic, meaning they can change over time. To keep your team on a productive path, here are some further tidbits of advice:

- **Keep communicating.** This is an important point, so I'll put it in italics: *Team presentations should be team efforts, from start to finish.* So often, I see groups that come up with the basic ideas of their plan together and then delegate individual parts to individual members without sufficient check-ins on their progress. What results is a mess—a piecemealed, mish-mashed, overlapping, and sometimes even contradictory mess. For a team presentation to work and to

capture all the benefits of true collaboration, you have to work with your group through every step of the process. Yes, there can be some delegation, but none of these individual roles will work well together if there isn't *consistent communication* among all team members. For teams to work, you have to communicate … a lot.

- **Avoid a divide-and-conquer mentality.** The first impulse of many groups is to assess the workload and immediately divide up responsibilities among team members (e.g., "You take the intro and the first main point, I'll take the second, you take the third," etc.). While that may seem like the most efficient way to get the work done quickly, it will likely end with the piecemealed mess of a presentation I just described above. Yes, you should each have different responsibilities in the presentation, but just giving people parts of the outline does not keep everyone invested and working together collaboratively. Instead, follow the guidelines of AIMC. As a team, go through the steps of analyzing your audience, identifying your intent, and formulating the beginning stages of your message. Figure out together what arguments you want to make, and what kinds of research and background information you will need to gather to support those claims. Assign different group members to different areas of expertise. If your team decided to create a presentation urging Southern officials to improve the commuter lounge on campus, Jonna could be assigned to research other schools' commuter facilities and perks, Eli could talk with staff at Southern to assess where a bigger lounge could possibly fit on campus, and Henley could design an opinion survey for commuter students, with you analyzing and compiling the data. Then, as a team, you each report back the information you learned and decide together how each piece can fit into the team's message. With each team member undertaking their own area of expertise, everyone will be more likely to make valuable contributions to the team.

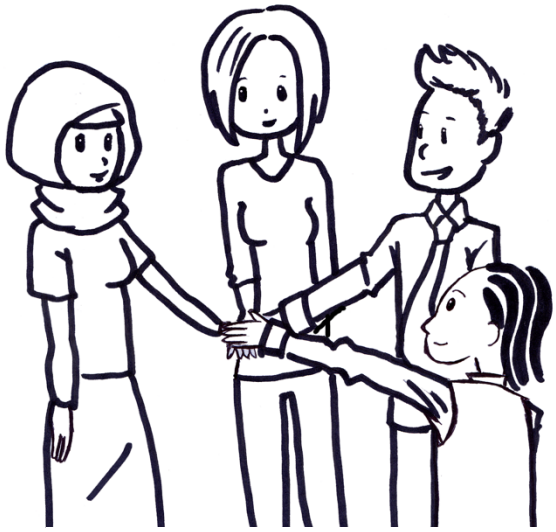

Figure 1. Teamwork makes the dream work.
Cartoon by Audrey Mora, 2014.

- **Make the most of meeting times.** Many professional meetings incorporate two valuable tools to keep them as productive as possible: agendas and meeting minutes. An ***agenda*** is a list of topics the group plans to discuss and the decisions they need to make during the meeting. These are usually created well before the meeting begins and are often sent to participants beforehand so that members can propose additions as needed. ***Meeting minutes*** are notes taken during the meeting, generally focused on the decisions the team has made on the agenda items and the next steps each member has agreed to take. Minutes are then sent to participants after the meeting so that everyone has a record and a shared understanding of how the group will be moving forward. For the two major group presentations in this course, you will be given meeting agendas and sheets on which you should take down your minutes so that you can use these tools to keep everyone on schedule and informed.

- **Share leadership among all members.** If one person runs every team meeting, other members may feel less valuable and less likely to offer contributions; after all, they are just waiting to be told what to do. Sharing responsibility among all teammates helps to keep everyone involved at a high level. One way to do this is to rotate the role of meeting leader. The person with the agenda tends to play an integral role in the meeting, reading off what needs to be accomplished and collecting group decisions for each agenda item. Having each member take at least one turn in this role keeps everyone "in the know" and invested in team outcomes.
- **Adjust group norms and structures as needed.** The first-day patterns you established do not have to be permanent if they are not working. If the communication protocol your team is following is still resulting in voices being silenced or individuals feeling frustrated, discuss the issues as a team and agree on a new tactic to try.
- **Identify and address issues quickly.** When problems arise in a team, they need to be dealt with swiftly to avoid damage to team camaraderie and work output. Do not let issues fester and resentment build, and do not resort to talking "behind someone's back." If you know that Shawn feels hurt by something Lee said during your group meeting, don't avoid the issue or complain to each other about Lee; talk about it calmly as a group with Lee. If you know the PowerPoint slide your team has designed is too visually overwhelming, point it out so the group can fix it. If you're feeling like your opinion is not being valued by the team, let them know. Be aware, though, that *how* you confront issues in a group can greatly affect whether the group improves from the feedback or implodes because of it. Here are some tips to keep confrontations from feeling too, well, confrontational:
    - **Speak non-judgmentally and specifically.** Don't make assumptions about people's feelings or intentions and avoid speaking in vague, general terms ("You don't value my opinions"). Instead, discuss others' actions in a more objective manner. Specifically point out the behaviors that are problematic ("I've mentioned a few times now that we cannot have this many images and words on one slide, but each time the subject of conversation changed and we didn't come back to it.") and calmly express how those actions make you feel ("I'm feeling a bit ignored, and I'm concerned about point deductions for this.").
    - **Avoid absolutes.** Words like "never" and "always" are not helpful in an argument. If you accuse someone of "never listening" or "always being rude," that person is likely to get defensive because they know that they don't ever *always* act poorly. Again, be specific about what the offending action was so that it can be discussed rationally.
    - **Focus on the path forward.** Winning is a good feeling, but winning should not be the goal of a confrontation. The goal of telling your team that you feel undervalued should not be to make them feel bad about themselves or even just to make yourself feel heard. The goal should be to fix this troubling communication pattern so that everyone can be productive and happy moving forward. To that end, you cannot dwell on your own hurt feelings or the wrongs that have already occurred. Express the problem and then move on to how your team can fix it. Stay solution-oriented.
    - **Remember to listen and to compromise.** Your way is not always the right way. Your opinion is not the only one that matters. Listen to everyone's thoughts and make strong efforts to understand others' point of view. Have each side summarize the other side's

opinions ("Taryn, you are saying that we need to move forward and finish the PowerPoint because our presentation is soon, and you don't think we have the time to fix this slide. Is that right?"). Then try to devise a solution that will work—at least to some degree—for everyone.

    - **If all else fails, employ a mediator.** Ask someone not involved in the conflict (someone with no "skin in the game," so to speak) to guide the conversation. The mediator can help ensure that both sides get the opportunity to speak and can help guide discussions about reasonable resolutions.

- **Don't let others feel isolated (and don't isolate yourself!).** In groups, it sometimes seems that one person doesn't quite fit in with everyone else. They may have less in common, have a different communication style, or may just have less motivation to succeed on the project or the course. Nonetheless, it is the team's responsibility to keep everyone invested in the team. Team success requires commitment from all members. If someone is isolating, redouble your efforts to bring them back into the fold. If you are feeling isolated, discuss it with your group and ask for whatever communication or structural changes you need to feel like you belong.

Making the Dream Work

While this article discusses some of the potential hazards of teamwork, working with others has far more positives than negatives, which is why teamwork will likely be a constant in your academic and professional life. As the saying goes, "Many hands make light work"; in other words, you can accomplish more working together than you can alone. The presentation tasks your group has been given will require multiple people to do well, not only to lessen the workload for each of you, but also to allow a variety of perspectives and expertise to result in the best ideas and execution possible.

So, now that you've been placed into a presentation team, get to know your group mates. Talk to them. Laugh with them. Learn to love them. Because to design and present a stellar presentation with them, you'll need to spend lots of quality time together.